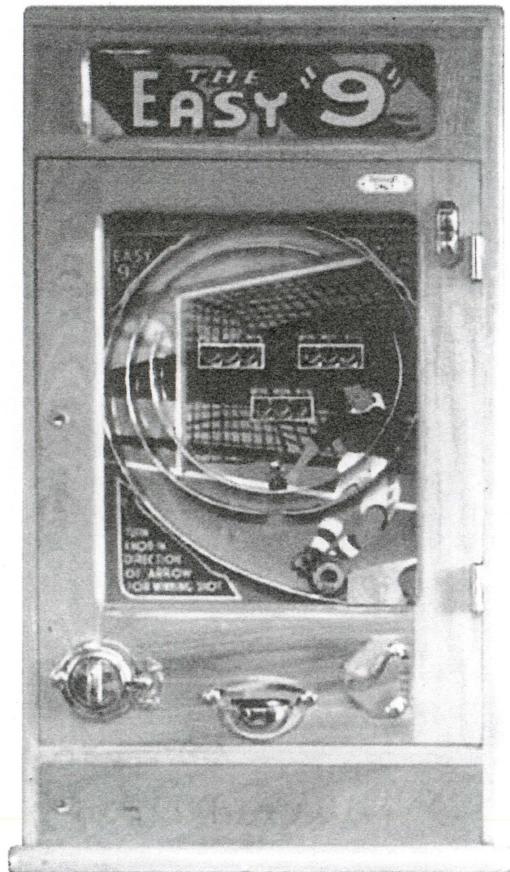


Mechanical Memories

Magazine

ISSUE 52

JAN. 2011



Happy New Year!

Inside this special issue – The Oliver Wales Story

Mechanical Memories Magazine

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Editorial

Hello, and a very happy New Year to you all. I stated last month, that this would be a special issue of the magazine, and indeed it is, as it is entirely taken up with Stuart Dale's painstaking research into Oliver Whales: The Oliver Whales story. I will say no more – just read and enjoy!

All the best for 2011

Jerry

News and Coming Events

Jukebox Madness Show

Well, they say no news is good news, but I am afraid I have here some rather sad, if not inevitable news: Jukebox Madness is no more. Shortly after announcing the date for this year's show, the organisers then announced that they have decided to call it a day. The ever rising cost of staging the show, together with dwindling interest and support, means that it is no longer financially viable.

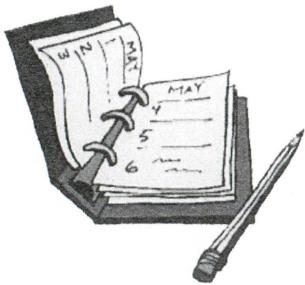
I first visited Jukebox Madness, I guess about fifteen or sixteen years ago, back in the days when the show was held at Ascot racecourse. It was always one of the major events in the year; a show that I am sure we all remember with fondness. In addition to a fine selection of jukeboxes, there was always a good selection of amusement machines from several well-known dealers. After the show moved to Kempton Park, I was unable to visit for a good number of years until about four years ago, when I have to say I was disappointed to say the least. With the retirement of some of the long-established jukebox dealers, together with diminished interest from the general public, the show was becoming little more than a 50s and 60s retro boot fair.

I guess few of us will miss Jukebox Madness in its final guise, with row upon row of old records and 50s tat, but I am sure that many of us will have very happy memories of earlier years when this show was one of the high-lights in the slottie calendar.

South Coast Slam 2011

Here's an event that might interest some of you. It's for the pinballers really, and although slotties and pinballers tend to be two completely separate breeds, there is a cross-over interest for some. The event takes place in Worthing over the weekend of 5th and 6th February, and I'm sure will be great fun for anyone with an interest in pinball. There will be numerous machines to play, with competitions and tournaments taking place over the weekend. In addition, there will also be a good selection of classic video games to play. I understand there will also be machines for sale. For more info. go to:

www.pinballnews.com/southcoastslam



Dates for your diary

South Coast Slam 5th & 6th February
Worthing, W. Sussex

Brighton Jukebox Show 2nd & 3rd April
Brighton racecourse

Bonhams Mechanical Music & Scientific Instruments Sale 17th May
Knowle

Great Dorset Steam Fair 31st Aug. – 4th September
Tarrant Hinton, Dorset

MMM Vintage Slot Collectors' Show & Auction 27th November
Provisional – date and venue to be confirmed

Bonhams Mechanical Music & Scientific Instruments Sale 29th November
Knowle

Don't forget – if you know of any event which would be of interest to readers of the magazine, please let me know so that I can include details on this page.

The OLIVER WHALES Story

By Stuart Dale

When I first started to look into the life of Oliver Whales, I had no idea that it would take me a full four years before I had a story that was worth telling. I think that story is now ready to be told, and I hope you will all enjoy reading it as much as I have enjoyed researching it.

I should like to thank my friend Kevin Gowland for his editing skills & contributions. I should also like to thank Oliver's granddaughter Helen who has kindly allowed me to use some of the photographs from her personal collection to illustrate Oliver's story. Unless otherwise stated, all photographs are courtesy Helen and the Whales family.

Stuart Dale

June 1895 was not only a happy time for Peter and Fanny Whales, it was also one of those dates in history that was to help make our hobby of collecting vintage slot machines a reality. For in June 1895 Oliver Owen Whales was born at Rookery Farm, Great Dunham, Norfolk. Oliver's mother and father were both well respected and successful cattle dealers and dairy farmers. They already had five other children, Oliver at that time being number six. It must have been a very busy household as they also had a 16 year old live in domestic called Lucy Moor. I should think that part of Lucy's duties would be to tend to the needs of young master Oliver. Little more is known of his early childhood other than he attended Great Dunham primary school; a school which is still in use today and is situated right at the side of St Andrews church in Great Dunham.

When Oliver had finally finished his schooling at the age of 15 years, he secured a position as an apprentice draper at Garland & sons of Norwich. It was a requirement of this apprenticeship that he live in lodging rooms above Garlands London Street shop in the centre of Norwich. He shared these rooms with draper's assistant James Carr and draper's window dresser Harold Henry Cland. Garlands was at that time one of the biggest retail establishments in the area and was still trading until the 1970s, when on 1st August the store experienced a huge fire which totally destroyed the building. Although the shop was rebuilt on the same site, it apparently was never quite the same and it closed completely in the mid 1980s. I have been told that any historical records that may have included references to Oliver's time at Garlands were destroyed in this fire.

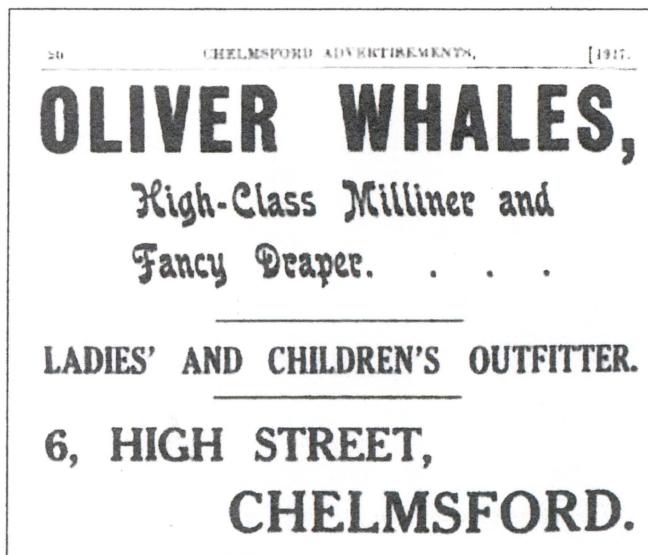
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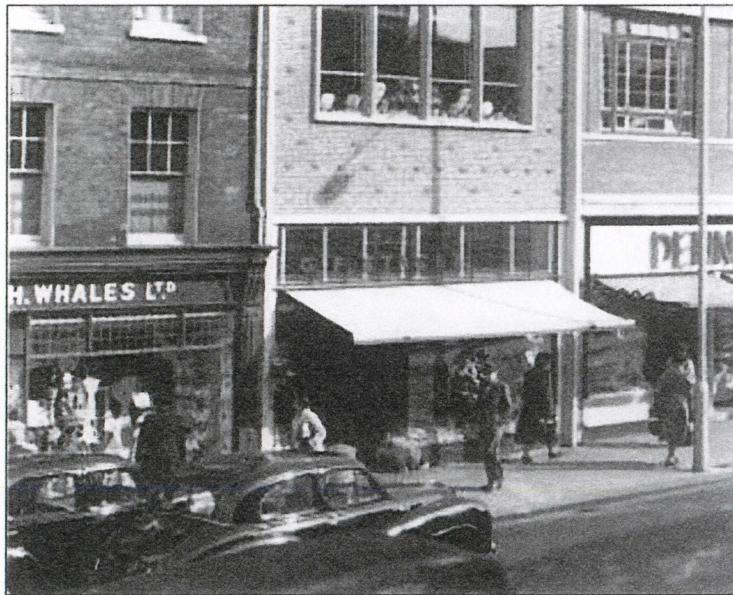
13, 15 & 17, London Street, Norwich
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Whist working at Garlands, Oliver became acquainted with Helen Edith Newman, who was working there as a shop assistant in the millinery department. Unlike Oliver, Helen who was four years his senior, didn't have to live over the shop, as she was still living at home with her mother Esther and her older sister Eva. They lived at 2 Churchill Road, which was only a short walk away. It was not long before this friendship blossomed into romance, and records show that in December 1916, at the age of 21 years, Oliver married Helen. The following year, they both left their employment at Garlands and opened their very own business. This as you would expect was a drapers shop. It was located at 6 High Street, Chelmsford in Essex. Oliver and Helen set up their first home in what must have been quite spacious and well appointed rooms over the shop, as they were to live

there until 1929. The sign proudly displayed above the main shop window in large gold letters **OLIVER WHALES High Class Milliner & Fancy Draper**. This first business venture was a great success and was soon to be followed by a second shop, which they set up less than a mile away at 7 Moulsham Street. Things were going well for Oliver and Helen and in 1921 they saw the arrival of their first child, a boy, who was proudly named Peter Oliver after both his father and grandfather. Seven years later Peter was to get a sister, when in 1928 Pauline Helen was born. As the family expanded, the accommodation above Number 6 was starting to get a little cramped. As there was no room to expand, Oliver took the decision to move the drapery business lock stock and barrel to Ipswich, where they set up shop in newly refurbished premises at 45, 47 & 49 Westgate Street. At the same time, they took a recently built red brick town house at 21 Park Road, Ipswich, where Oliver, Helen, Peter, Pauline and Pauline's now ageing mother Esther were to live. Sadly in 1933 Esther passed away aged 77 years. Oliver was now forging ahead with plans to open even more shops. Between 1929 and 1933 he set up more branches at 3 Head Street Colchester, Numbers 14/15 Electric Parade and 27 Station Road, Clacton-On-Sea. But 1933 was to be the year when everything changed for Oliver; the financial world was still reeling from the shockwaves caused by the Wall Street crash of 1929. Following the depression, his new shops were not doing as well as he had expected. The banks were becoming more and more reluctant to back him, and Oliver was fast running out of money. In an attempt to salvage what he could from the situation, Oliver was forced to put his chain of shops into voluntary liquidation, but was fortunate enough to avoid total bankruptcy. He managed to sell his newly renovated shop in Ipswich to Jack Pelerman, a costumier. He also managed to dispose of his property at Station Road, Clacton.



It was during his time at Clacton-On-Sea that he became acquainted with the amusement trade and Oliver's life was to change forever after meeting William Thompson. Thompson lived in the Midlands and had been involved with coin operated machines for a good number of years, and just like Oliver he had been hit hard by the crash of 1929. Thompson had not been as lucky as Oliver and did end up being declared bankrupt and was struggling hard to try and restart his company. In 1936 Oliver, on seeing the potential, invested some of the money he had left into Thompson's new venture. Oliver was now back in business. Thompson's untimely death in 1939 left Oliver in control of the company. Once again, Oliver decided to relocate to a more suitable area. For this type of business, he made the move to the seaside town of Redcar in Cleveland, taking his son Peter, and his newly acquired amusement machine business with him. Unfortunately, the stress and pressures in the business appeared to have spilled over into Oliver and Helen's home life, as Helen and their daughter Pauline didn't make the move to Redcar. They went to live in High Wycombe where they set up home at 27 Rectory Avenue. Later, with a little help from Oliver, they opened up a dress shop of their own at 18 the High Street, High Wycombe. The shop went by the name of H. Whales Ltd, which they ran together until 1955, when Pauline emigrated to Sydney Australia, where she married Dameter Horbach. Helen, at the age of 64, decided to follow Pauline to Australia where she set up home and lived out her days in the Lane Cove area of Sydney. Pauline and Dameter also lived in the same area. Helen passed away there on the 15th July 1978, and despite the marital split, Helen and Oliver were never divorced.



Helen Whales' shop in High Wycombe, c. early 1950s.

In 1939 Oliver is listed in the Middlesbrough phone book as *Oliver Whales 'Amusement Caterer' The Esplanade, Redcar*, where he opened and ran his successful amusement arcade business known as Fun City. The outside of the ground floor of Fun City was clad with bright yellow Formica type material, yellow being Oliver's favourite colour. The arcade also had a cafe where you could get a cup of tea or coffee and a snack or ice cream. At the north end of the arcade, Oliver installed a Dodgem track with 12 brand new dodgem cars. The sign outside read "drive your own car members of H.M.Forces only 2d a time." This proved very popular with the troops who were home from the war on leave.

Oliver set up his amusement machine manufacturing workshops in rooms at the rear of this establishment. He soon became a well-known figure in the amusement machine business and had associations with other manufacturers such as Fred Bolland & Alfred Clement. In fact, Oliver formed a partnership with Alfred Clement and for a short period of time they were known by the name Whales & Clements. At this time, Clements used part of Oliver's Fun City workshops to convert and repair his own reel type machines. In return Clement made Oliver his sole north of England agent.



Brand new dodgem cars, proudly displayed on the track at Fun City.

Oliver was once again living over the shop in the rooms above the Fun City Arcade. His living accommodation was accessed via a separate external staircase off Graffenberg Street, which ran down the north side of the Fun City arcade and linked the High Street to the Esplanade. As you can see from the photo, Graffenberg Street has had a temporary stone wall erected across it, this was to help slow up any attempted invasion by German forces.

Once inside his private rooms, you would be greeted by stacks of cardboard and wooden boxes. Some of these boxes were packed with new parts for his slot machines; others were filled with Polos, Spangles and other confections or small gifts and toys that he used to fill up his prize giving machines. Almost every room was the same. Oliver not only lived for slot machines, he lived with them; it was his life. This arrangement of living over the arcade suited Oliver as he was never far from his work, which meant that he could keep a keen eye on how things were being run. Oliver managed to keep his business running all through the Second World War, though at times it was difficult due to shortages and rationing of materials. Oliver would often take used or broken amusement machines in part exchange for his new or reconditioned machines.



Early photograph of Fun City. Note Oliver's van, which is sign-written: Oliver Whales, manufacturer & dealer in higher grade automatic machines.

The used or broken machines would then be stripped down and refurbished ready to sell to the next operator that came looking for a bargain. This system worked very well and Oliver soon built up a good reputation in the amusement trade. He also made new machines of his own design as and when the materials were available. The cases were generally manufactured from pine rather than oak, as oak was a scarce material during the war. Many of the components for his new machines would have been salvaged from older German and British machines. Much of Oliver's stock of parts was acquired from the failed British Manufacturing Co., who had been a major supplier of allwins and other wall machines throughout the 1930s.



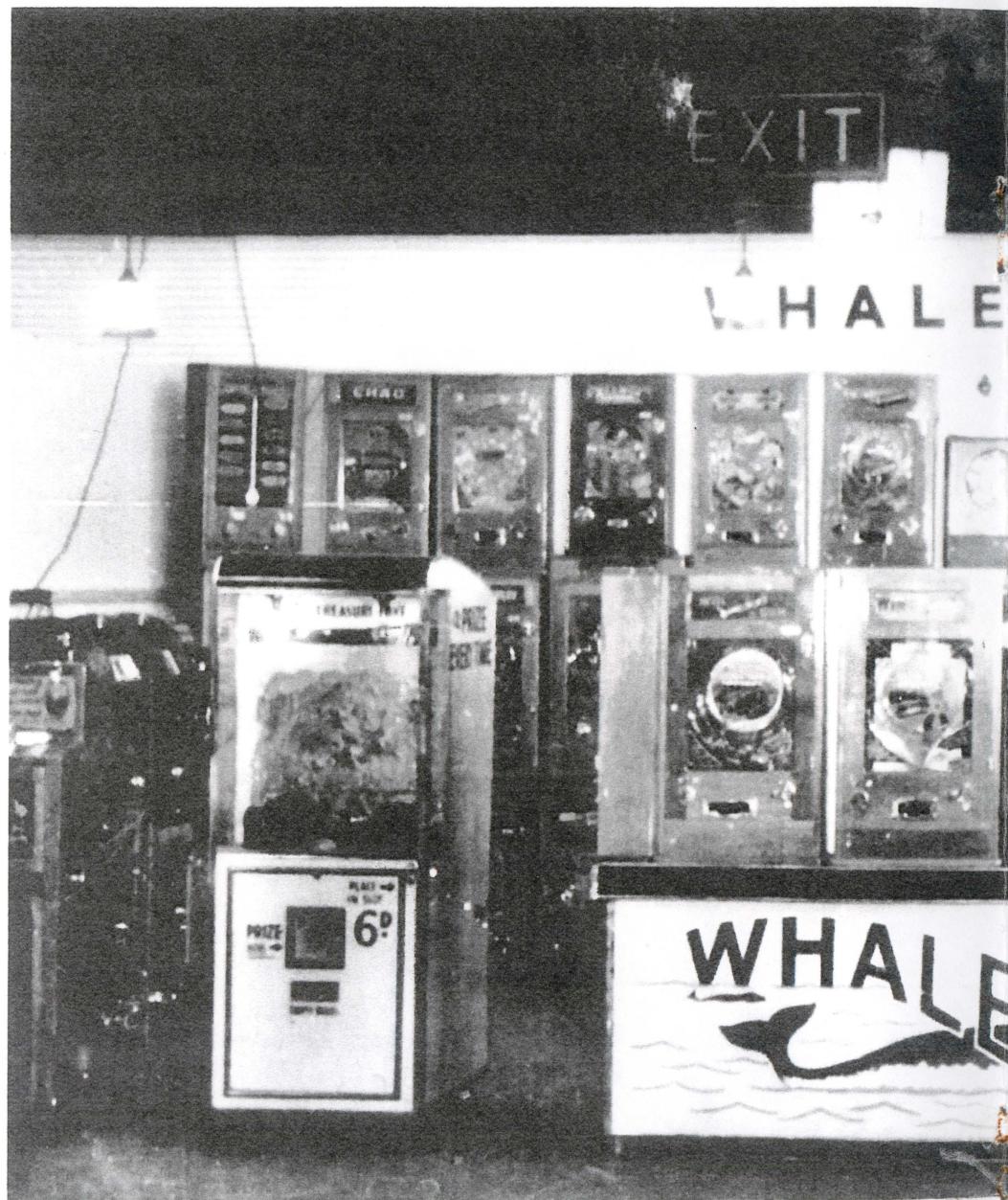
Khyber Pass, an early and extremely rare Oliver Whales allwin, probably produced during or soon after the war. Although it is a Whales machine, the playfield would have come from BMCo stock, as the ball cup configuration is clearly identical to BMCo's Cresta Run allwin. Oliver Whales must have acquired a fair number of these playfields, as it was also used in another Whales allwin of similar era: Victory Ball, of which a small number are known to have survived. Picture courtesy John Peterson.

Through the war years, Oliver developed a simple case design for his allwins, which would have made them easier and cheaper to produce. Gone was the fancy fluting and routing that had prevailed in earlier years; his machine cases now had simple rounded edges. They often had an added topflash pediment with an art deco appearance. The case design and art deco pediment can be clearly seen in the picture of **Khyber Pass** on the opposite page. The Whales allwins produced during the war were often topical and patriotic, two examples being **Spitfire** and a giant allwin **Defiant**, both having ball gallery shields in the profile of a plane. Probably the last patriotic allwin produced was **Victory Ball**, in 1946.

There is no way of knowing how many Whales allwins were produced during the war years, but from surviving numbers, and given the circumstances, it would certainly have been enough to firmly establish Oliver Whales as a market leader after the war.



*The Major, a giant Whales allwin probably produced in the late 40s.
Picture courtesy John Peterson.*



Oliver Whales exhibition display. On the floor, extreme left are stereo picture viewers. The wall machines are predominantly allwins, with the exception of top row extreme left



and Elephant Treasure Cave. On the right of the picture are 4-way allwin consoles. Kiss-O-Meter, and centre top row roulette type machine, possibly Greyhound Racer.

By the time the war ended Oliver was well set up and ready to put his range of new machines into full production, and the demand for machines from operators returning to business after the war was on the increase. His main trade was in allwin machines and working from one or two basic designs he managed to produce a vast range of different models. At some point, probably the early 1950s, Oliver introduced a radical new case design. The height of the case was extended to incorporate a topflash, thus dispensing with the clumsy pediment. In addition to the sleek streamlined case, Oliver developed new silk-screened backflashes, which were a far cry from the single-colour playfields of the pre war machines.

With the new case design, there soon followed an innovation that would have lasting popularity, particularly with children. When sweet rationing ended in 1953, Oliver brought out a range of allwins that paid out sweets as prizes. They had names like **Win-a-Gum**, **Win-a-Penguin**, and **Win-a-Polo**; he produced about seventeen different machines of this type. You have to remember that sweets had been on ration for ten years, so the new machines were very popular. In addition to the 'sweetie' allwins, there were also machines that gave you a prize in a small box, **Win-a-Prize** and **Win-a-Gift**. The prize was usually along the lines of a finger ring or maybe a plastic magnifying glass. You would then be instructed to put your empty box back in the slot at the front of the machine for re-use. It's that rationing thing again and it also saved the operator some money by not having to buy more boxes.



Brand new machines, ready for dispatch.

The popularity of Oliver's machines was such that he had to look for extra workshop space to keep up with the demand. One such workshop was located nearby in Lord Street, just opposite the end of Alfred Street. This workshop was mainly used to finish and polish the oak cabinets before fitting out. Oliver would recruit local schoolboys as part time workers. I managed to track down one who is now in his 60s and living in Australia. His name is Keith Rowlands and this is what had to say:

"My memories are very vague of those times, as I was only about 11 years old. I can remember the work was hard because it was all polish in those days (no varnish) and we only got a little pocket money for our hard work, but in those days if you wanted pocket money you had to work for it. I know it was a long time ago but I still have one arm with muscles like Popeye. I worked there with Rodney Brown, he was in the same class as me at James Muck School. There were others but I can't remember their names".

One worker that Keith would have encountered was Harry Warren, who was the works foreman. It was his job to oversee the manufacture and delivery of new machines. Apparently, he walked with a pronounced limp, due to the fact he had a wooden leg! There was also Evelyn Alderson, who was Oliver's housekeeper and general 'girl Friday'. She had been in the employ of Oliver since his early days of arriving in Redcar.

Although the machine cases were finished in Oliver's workshops, they were supplied by a local cabinetmaker by the name of Wadsworth, who traded in the nearby village of Marske. It seems that Oliver's business connections with Wadsworth went far beyond machine cases, as it is recorded that Oliver had shares with a Mr Wadsworth in a ghost train and cake walk on the Redcar seafront. It has not been ascertained whether it was the same Wadsworth, but it seems likely that at the very least, they were related. Additionally, among other business interests listed in 1947, Oliver was in partnership with Mrs C Wadsworth in connection with the Victoria Café, The Esplanade, Redcar. However, by 1950 Mrs Wadsworth is listed as sole owner of the café.

In addition to allwins, Oliver also made machines that told your fortune or rated your passion (or otherwise): the **Kiss-O-Meter**. In 1949 Oliver's son Peter married local Whitby girl Mary Paylor. Mary is said to have come up with the idea for one of Oliver's prize giving machines, which was a large floor standing machine wherein you put your penny in the slot and a model elephant running on a circular track disappeared in to a cave at the right hand side of the machine and reappeared a few seconds later carrying a boxed prize on its back. This prize was then tipped down a shoot for you to collect. The machine was produced in two versions, the larger version was known as the **Elephant Treasure Caves** and the smaller version as the **Baby Elephant**.

The 1950s were a boom time for Oliver, his machines were being exported to every corner of the world. The allwin range expanded and Oliver also produced free-standing cabinets housing three, four, or six of his allwin machines. In addition, Oliver also entered the stereo viewer market when he produced his **Picture Box** machine. The machine is well known in its counter model format, but less well known is a floor standing version. Mary Whales said that an example of the floor standing version was sited at the Fun City, Redcar arcade.

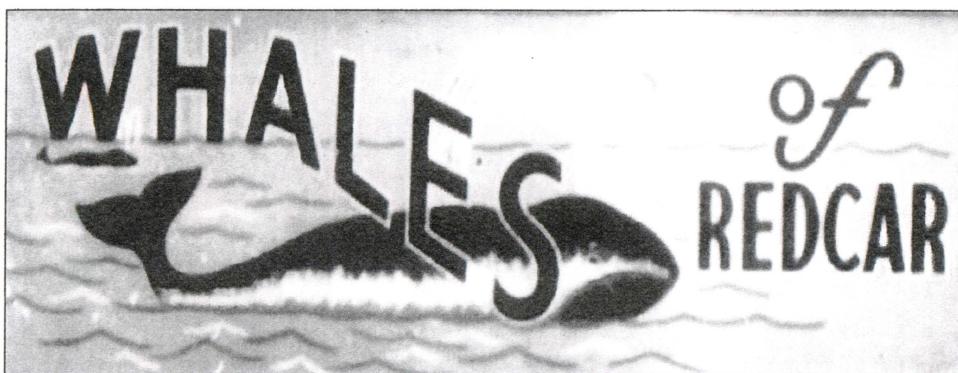


*Oliver Whales in attendance at a trade fair, probably late 1950s.
Behind him is Mary Whales, Oliver's daughter-in-law.*

Although we as collectors remember Oliver Whales as a manufacturer of machines, we should not forget that he was also an operator. In addition to his Fun City arcade in Redcar, Oliver and his son Peter opened various other arcades over the years along the northeast coast, including Plaza Amusements in King Street, Bridlington, and arcades in Scarborough and Whitby.

Oliver was a member of the Amusement Caterers Association and attended many amusement trade fairs to promote his machines. One of the main annual trade shows was held at the Earls Court Exhibition Centre. This was always a family affair as Oliver would take his son Peter, daughter in law Mary, and grandchildren Helen and Oliver with him. The picture opposite shows Oliver on his trade stand, with Mary in the background. Helen told me that it was always an exciting time for her, and they always stayed in the best rooms at the Regent Palace Hotel in Piccadilly Circus.

Although Oliver never learned how to drive a car himself, he did attend many travelling fairs, and can be recalled by one retired operator as selling machines to the travelling showmen from the back of his van.



I never met Oliver myself, but I have been told by people who knew him that he was a quite a large man with a cheerful disposition and was very fond of his two children. However, he was not to be fooled, as he could, when required, be very good at sorting out troublesome customers who misbehaved in his arcades.

He would keep very strange hours and would regularly stay up until after midnight to make sure that everything was tidied away when the arcade closed for the night. Due to this, he would seldom rise early the next day. When he did rise it was usual to see him wandering around the place in his favourite red smoking jacket with the braided lapels and large sleeves, "this I think may have been a throwback to his days as a draper". When it came to business, his normal attire was a dark blue pin stripe suit, long black overcoat and matching trilby.

Sadly, on the 25th of January 1962, after locking up the arcade as usual, Oliver went to bed where he passed away in his sleep. He was 66 years of age. He was laid to rest in the well tended family plot at St Andrews churchyard in Great Dunham, Norfolk. His funeral was well attended by family, friends and the business acquaintances he had made over the years. Oliver left a simple and straight forward will, which stated that all the proceeds from his estate should be divided equally and absolutely between his son Peter and his daughter Pauline.

And all the things he left to us as collectors?

Well, they are priceless.

Stuart Dale

Foot note:

After Oliver's death, most of his empire was dismantled and sold off very quickly. Oliver died in 1962, and by 1965 the site on which Fun City once stood was being used as a car park. The Miller family took over the Whitby arcade soon after Oliver's death, although the Whales family retained ownership of the premises. Almost half a century later, and the Millers still run the arcade, with the premises still in the ownership of the Whales family.



Oliver Whales
1895 to 1962

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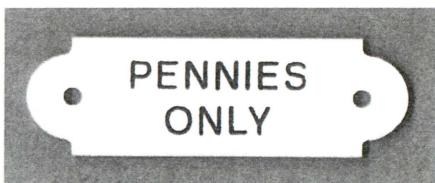
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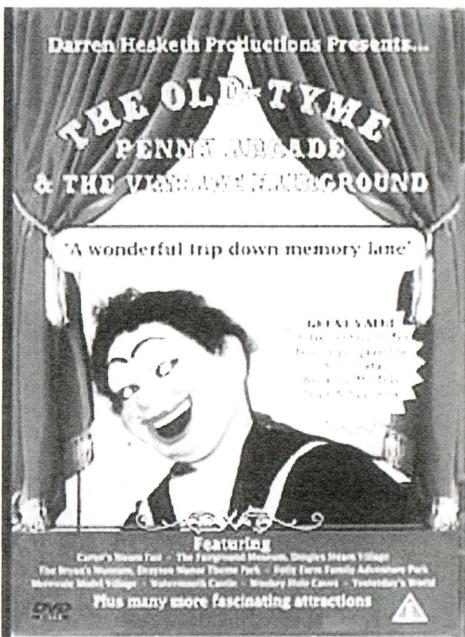
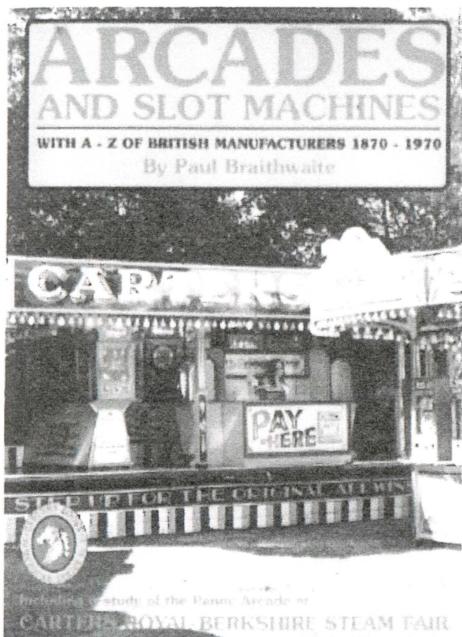
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